Rio Grande NF Forest Plan Revision
Wildlife Meeting #2
July 16, 2015
Saguache Road and Bridge Building
Meeting Summary

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Randy Ghormley, Dwight Irwin, Angie Krall
- *Peak Facilitation*: Heather Bergman, Katie Waller

Approximately 5 members of the public were present.

Meeting Overview

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this meeting to discuss fish, wildlife, and rare plants on the RGNF. Information gathered from this and previous discussions will help inform and influence the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

Forest Plan Revision and Assessment Process

Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs Specialist for the Rio Grande National Forest, introduced himself and explained the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15 to 20 years. The last forest plan for the Rio Grande was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began. The revision consists of three steps expected to be completed by 2017: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase.

USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform the assessment phase, in which current conditions and trends are analyzed to determine which portions of the existing plan should be changed. After determining the need for change, USFS will develop and analyze multiple management options to determine the most beneficial options for inclusion in the final forest plan. Mr. Blakeman explained that since the last plan was written in 1996 conditions have changed due to a multitude of factors. He asked the public to think about how recent changes have impacted fish, wildlife, and rare plants and what, if anything, needs to be done to in the future in terms of management

Mr. Blakeman stressed the importance of public participation and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public can also provide input by email at comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us, on the interactive plan revision web site at http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

MAP-BASED DISCUSSION

Attendees participated in a map-based discussion to denote areas where forest conditions are good and should be maintained, where they could be a concern in the future, and where they are a current concern, all through the lens of wildlife and habitat.

-GREEN – Areas with good conditions that should be maintained
• RGNF has good habitat for most species. • Lake Fork of the Conejos River provides good habitat for Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout. • Lake Fork of the Conejos River has pockets of core genetic fish species.
-ORANGE- Areas of emerging/possible future concerns, or areas with potential for expansion/enhancement
• Bonanza and Continental Divide are seeing more cheat grass coming in from Gunnison. • 4-Mile Creek, Elk Creek, and Looters Creek are seeing vegetative damage from moose. • CDOT gravel pits along road to Cowtown have henbane plants could have impacts across the state. • Kelly Creek is seeing an increase in bears. • Private land has increasing amount of Henbane and owners are not addressing it.
-RED – Areas with current concerns
• Much of the RGNF, especially Saguache Park, is seeing damage to riparian zones from grazing. • Park Creek has issues with water quality and riparian health due to dispersed camping. • Kelly Creek has lots of standing dead trees from fire and beetle kill, which harm wildlife. • High elevations have experienced loss of spruce trees that are important habitat for Dusky Grouse. • Kelly Creek has aspen stands with a high mortality rate due to lack of foliage regeneration after tent caterpillar infestations.

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Participants discussed the main themes related to fish, wildlife, and rare plants. They identified species that are important or unique to the RGNF and their specific management needs, as well as the larger impacts of fish, wildlife, and rare plant health.

What plants, fish, animals, and invertebrate species are important to you on the RGNF?

Mammals	• Cows • Mule deer • Elk
Fish	• Rio Grande cutthroat trout • Rio Grande sucker
Birds	• Dusky grouse • Turkey

Do any of these species need special management attention? If so, why?

Mammals	• Bobcats are being increasingly hunted due to a growing market for their pelt. • Moose population increase damages riparian areas and harms cattle grazing. • Mule deer population is declining across Colorado. • High population of elk in the Baca are overgrazing and negatively impacting resources for other species. • Bear population is too high and may become increasingly aggressive.
Fish	• Rio Grande cutthroat trout need help to prevent becoming endangered.

	• Survival of Rio Grande cutthroat trout benefits ranchers and fisherman. • Fish habitat is damaged by long-term camping sites that encourage overfishing and damage to riparian areas.
Birds	• Ground bird populations are lower than they should be. • Dusky grouse have lost spruce habitats.

What plant and animal species are unique to the RGNF and what is the habitat that supports them?

Species and habitats	• Native fish, especially the Rio Grande sucker, rely on tributaries. • Uncompahgre Fritillary is an endemic, high-alpine butterfly found only on RGNF, Grand Mesa Uncompahgre Gunnison National Forest (GMUG), and a small part of San Juan National Forest (SJNF).

What management concerns might influence the long-term health of these species? How can the future management of the forest address some of those concerns?

Increased Enforcement	• Utilize more range riders to prevent overgrazing in riparian areas. • Prevent dispersed camping with more rangers to enforce time limits.
Environmental Concerns	• Beavers need protection from habitat damage and human impacts because they are beneficial to the entire ecosystem and other species. • Fish are harmed by erosion, fire, dead trees, and other environmental changes. • Logging is less damaging to habitats and wildlife than controlled burns.
Lack of Resources	• Train citizens to collect raw data for USFS analysis, like what happens with archaeology. • Include range monitoring training to educate citizens who are gathering data. • Collaborate with Southwest Energy Corporation.

How do wildlife and plants in the Rio Grande National Forest contribute to the socio-economic sustainability of the San Luis Valley (SLV)? What species and/or habitat qualities most contribute to these values?

Tourism	• Hunting and fishing licenses for deer, elk, moose, bears, and wild trout bring out-of-town visitors to the SLV • Bighorn sheep and other large game draw visitors for sightseeing.
Forest Health	• Cattle grazing benefits the local economy and forest health. • Biodiversity is imperative as all species are interconnected.

FOREST PLAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Standards and guidelines are the "rules of the forest" that are documented in a forest plan. Standards are requirements; they are things the Forest Service *must* do. Guidelines are things the Forest Service can or should do. During this meeting, participants reviewed and discussed several standards and guidelines that are in the current forest plan. Forest Service staff identified these standards and guidelines for discussion due to confusion regarding their meaning, difficulty implementing them, and/or changed context on the ground. Participants were invited to provide feedback about whether the standards and guidelines are working, whether they should be changed from standards to guidelines or vice versa, and whether they should be deleted altogether.

Standard: Provide adequate cover to maintain screening along roads that are kept open for human use and along openings, so as to minimize disturbance and harassment of deer and elk.

Do Not Change Guideline	• Taking away cover from roads would increase chances of deer and elk being hit by cars.

	• Keep this as a standard and do not change to a guideline. • Maintain some ambiguous wording to provide USFS staff flexibility.
Change Guideline	• Define or clarify "along roads." • Define or clarify "adequate cover."
Additional Comments	• Favor logging over prescribed burns as it better maintains cover for wildlife. • Cut back bushes next to roads as a matter of human safety.

Standard: Protect known and inactive raptor nests. The extent of the protection will be based on proposed management activities, human activities existing before nest establishment, species, topography, vegetative cover, and other factors. A no-disturbance buffer around active nest sites will be required from nest site selection to fledgling (generally March through July). Exceptions may occur when individuals are adapted to human activity.

Do Not Change Guideline	• Retain some ambiguous wording to provide USFS some flexibility. • Let USFS biologists decide if this is appropriate or not.
Additional Comments	• Apply this standard equally to all proposed management activities. • Certain species need larger buffer areas comprised of specific vegetation.

Standard: Where newly discovered Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, or Sensitive Species (TES) habitat is identified, an analysis shall be conducted to determine if any adjustments in the Forest Plan are needed.

Do Not Change Guideline	• Ensure that species continue to thrive and are protected in the future. • Protect species from conflict between management entities.
Change Guideline	• Assure the public that the forest plan can be revisited for both newly discovered and previously discovered species. • Find a way to ensure other management entities follow rules regarding TES species.

Guideline: On Management Area Prescription 5.41 (Deer & Elk Winter Range), livestock grazing strategies are implemented to achieve goals for deer and elk.

Do Not Change Guideline	• Ensure flexibility for ranchers on land where succession is important. • Allow grazing to occur in locations and at levels that are beneficial.
Change Guideline	• Change it to a standard. • Make it a standard, but create flexible wording to make it more adaptive. • Include migration habitats along with winter habitats. • Make it a standard to simplify enforcement. • Identify a trigger for specific plant heights.
Additional Comments	• Habitat Partnership Program (HPP) has been trying to keep wildlife on winter ranges year round. • Strategies are not being fully thought out to properly protect winter ranges.

Desired Condition: On Management Area Prescription 5.42 (Bighorn Sheep Areas), maintain a buffer between domestic sheep and bighorn sheep, to prevent interaction. **Standard: Domestic sheep allotments that become vacant within the identified buffer shall not be reissued for domestic sheep use, but may be issued for cattle use.**

Do Not Change Guideline	• Protect domestic and wild herds from the spread of disease. • Ensure that there is long-term protection between species with a buffer zone. • Ensure that herds have a chance to break out of the cycle of disease.

	• Keep Bighorn sheep off the TES list.
Change Guideline	• Update this standard with new scientific information that defines "buffer." • Do not issue allotments for cattle grazing, as the two species do not thrive in the same habitats. • Remove "buffer" and instead include an analysis of contact risk as some risk is acceptable but there must be an identified limit. • Add wording that requests the use of best available science.
Additional Comments	• Many sheep grazing allotments are empty and have been for a long time. • Sheep grazers say they are not the problem. • This will be the end of domestic sheep grazing.

Additional Comments

- Emphasize citizen engagement and partnerships in the new forest plan.
- Concerned citizens are willing to help better the land from which they benefit.
- Western Watersheds wants to end grazing and is not actually consulting with ranchers about their policies.
- Beavers are good in moderation.

Questions

- *How do caterpillar viruses work and what is the associated mortality rate?*
  The tent caterpillars defoliate aspen trees, which look dead, but then leaf out again later in the summer. Eventually, it is expected that a virus will move in and kill the caterpillars – but there is no way to predict when that will happen. Aspen usually don't die from tent caterpillar infestations, but sometimes secondary insects and/or diseases attack the weakened trees and can kill them. Also, if the aspen are defoliated several years in a row, the trees may use up their sugar reserves in their roots and then die.
- *Can the RGNF utilize controlled burns as a management prescription?*
  Yes, this is a management practice the RGNF uses regularly. Every year we use prescribed burns to reduce fuels and improve wildlife habitat.
- *How does disease spread between domestic sheep and Bighorn Sheep herds?*
  Pasteurella disease is spread through direct contact between domestic and bighorn sheep. In some cases, domestic sheep allotments overlap with the areas bighorn sheep herds use. This increases the risk of spreading pasteurella disease, which can be fatal to bighorn sheep.